

The Spanish-American War: The Cuban Perspective

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History graduate student Greg Aydt wrote this article, winner of the Hamand History Graduate Writing Award, for Dr. Beck's seminar on Imperialism. Like the previous article, it attempts an alternative perspective to an often-viewed historical problem. Greg presented a paper at the Southern Illinois Regional Phi Alpha Theta Conference and is writing a thesis on Montana lynchings.

The traditional view of the Spanish-American War begins with the infamous explosion of the U.S. battleship Maine, and proceeds through convincing American army and navy victories. This narrative however, lacks one crucial item: the views of the Cuban people themselves. Even the very name assigned to the war itself seems to ignore this major participant, who was involved from the very beginning. The fight against Spain which the United States joined in 1898 already had been carried on by the Cuban people for several years. Traditionally, historians have viewed the entrance of the United States into the Cuban Revolution as a prerequisite for the defeat of Spain on the island. From the Cuban perspective, this interpretation is open to debate, as is the American motivation for entering the conflict.

Cuba's Second War for Independence began late in February of 1895. A previous attempt to overthrow the Spanish rulers of Cuba had been defeated in 1878, but the intervening years had not seen much improvement in the status of the Cuban people. While the use of the terms Cuban and Spanish may imply that the two sides were of different ethnic backgrounds, this is not necessarily the case. The Indian population of the island had essentially been eliminated when colonization first occurred, and no foreign immigration was allowed. Consequently, about four out of every five Cubans were actually Spaniards, or of second, third or fourth generation Spanish descent. The remainder, about one out of every five Cubans, were Creole mulattos and descendants of former slaves from Africa. This meant that, for the most part, the Cuban Revolution was actually a civil war between republicans from Cuba and monarchists from Spain. [\(1\)](#)

A Cuban patriot named José Martí organized the revolution from his base of operations in the United States. For years, Martí had been working among the Cuban emigrés, both in the United States and in nations throughout Latin America, attempting to plan a revolt against the Spanish government in Cuba. The revolutionary heartland was Florida, where there were sixty-one clubs devoted to Cuban independence. These clubs, known as *juntas*, asked their members to donate one tenth of their earnings to the independence movement. Many members also joined the newly formed Cuban Revolutionary Party during 1892. This party served as the political movement behind the revolution. While the *juntas* were most numerous in Florida, there was also an important independence group in New York. They contributed, not monetarily, but by obtaining the support of two key groups: the labor unions and the newspapers. [\(2\)](#)

By 1894, Martí decided to launch the revolution. One of the primary reasons for his decision to launch the attack at this time was his fear that a growing imperialist movement in the United States might

prompt annexation before independence. Martí had good reason to believe this, as U.S. Secretary of State James G. Blaine was a proponent of expansion. In fact, as early as 1881 Blaine had written, "[i]f ever ceasing to be Spanish, Cuba must necessarily become American and not fall under any other European domination." Martí also observed the attempt by the United States to annex Hawaii in 1893. Though the attempt did not succeed, it caused him to believe that Cuba might be the next target of American expansion. As Blaine wrote in 1881, "Hawaii ...holds in the western sea much the same position as Cuba in the Atlantic. It is the key to the maritime dominion of the Pacific States as Cuba is the key to the Gulf trade."⁽³⁾

The similarities between Cuba and Hawaii were more than geographic. Hawaii's economy subsisted on a single crop; ninety-nine percent of the island's exports in 1890 consisted of sugar bound for the United States. When the United States began giving American growers a bounty of two cents per pound, Hawaiian sugar cane growers were devastated. Obviously, owners of sugar cane plantations would find annexation to be beneficial for their pocketbooks. Cuba's situation was almost identical. For this reason, Martí knew that if the United States attempted to bring Cuba into the Union, some wealthy Cubans would support the move. In spite of their small numbers, these people presented a formidable threat to Martí because of their economic power.⁽⁴⁾

A more immediate threat than the economic pressure caused even greater concern. Some Cubans advocated asking the United States to help a potential revolution by sending American troops to support the rebels in the field. From Martí's point of view, however, this was the last thing a Cuban revolution needed. He bitterly opposed seeking any military intervention by United States troops. Martí told why he opposed this in a letter to his friend and fellow patriot Gonzalo de Quesada. He wrote, "I don't want the principle established of putting our fortunes into a body where, because of its influence as a major country, the United States is to exercise the principal part." He expressed his fears less diplomatically, but perhaps more succinctly, when he wrote "[o]nce the United States is in Cuba, who will get her out?"⁽⁵⁾

In 1894, the United States levied a 40 percent tariff on imported sugar.⁽⁶⁾ This led to an economic depression in Cuba, causing Cuban sugar producers to begin looking for a way to retain the United States as a possible outlet for excess sugar production. Martí knew that talk of annexation would soon be occurring, both in Havana and Washington. He had already decided that if Cuba was going to experience "the reality of independence," then she must win that independence of her own accord and retain her sovereignty throughout the revolution.⁽⁷⁾ With the threat of annexation in mind, Martí stated just before the revolution began, "Cuba must be free from Spain and the United States." After the revolt had begun, he described his reason for launching the attack so quickly. "The Cuban war has broken out in America in time to prevent ...the annexation of Cuba to the United States." José Martí's words drive home the point that he was concerned about both Spanish and American imperialism.⁽⁸⁾

Martí recruited other military leaders to command the revolutionary forces in battle. He chose Máximo Gómez to act as the Commander-in-Chief of his army, and he also obtained the services of Antonio Maceo to lead a portion of the Cuban revolutionaries. Both of these men had been heroes of the earlier war against the Spanish in Cuba, so they would provide the insurrection with instant legitimacy for most of the Cuban people. Gómez personified the spirit of the revolution in the eyes of Cubans, and his dream was to become the George Washington of a newly liberated Cuban nation. General Maceo also served as an inspiration to many Cubans. As a mulatto, his participation in the rebellion convinced the mulattos

and former slaves living in Cuba that they too would benefit from the revolution's success. [\(9\)](#)

While these men led the military battle in Cuba, another important battle raged in the United States. This fight was based in New York, where the local *junta* was filled with several powerful Cuban emigrés. The leader of this organization of unnaturalized Cubans and their supporters was Tomás Estrada Palma, a former schoolteacher now trying to free Cuba using his connections in New York. The goal of the *junta* was to spread news from the revolution among New York's influential newspaper reporters. Another key player in the United States was Martí's close friend and associate Gonzalo de Quesada. De Quesada, although he referred to himself as the Cuban Revolutionary *Chargé d'Affaires*, did not actually hold an official diplomatic post. Nonetheless, this did not prevent him from lobbying for the Cuban cause in Washington. Unlike Martí, the New York *junta* and de Quesada wanted United States intervention to quickly win the revolution for Cuba. [\(10\)](#)

On May 19, 1895, the Spanish killed José Martí in battle. Not only had the Cuban Revolution lost the man who had painstakingly planned and organized the insurrection, but they had also lost the strongest voice against American intervention. To the very end, Martí warned his fellow revolutionaries to guard against possible United States' intervention. The day before he was killed, Martí began a letter to one of his many friends. The letter, though never finished, again expressed Martí's apprehensions about the course of the revolution. "It is my duty," he wrote, "to prevent, by the independence of Cuba, the United States from spreading over the West Indies and falling, with that added weight, upon other lands of our America." Certainly, Martí was aware of a danger that others either did not see, or chose to ignore; however, even Martí was not optimistic about his chances of accomplishing his goal. He concluded his statement by noting "I have lived inside the monster and know its insides-and my weapon is only the slingshot of David." [\(11\)](#)

Traditionally, U.S. historians have viewed American intervention in Cuba in 1898 as saving the Cuban revolution from impending defeat. A close examination casts considerable doubt on this perspective. In February 1898, the Spanish general Ramón Blanco ordered a large army into battle against General Gómez, intending to destroy Gómez's troops. The attack failed dismally. By March 1, Gómez reported that "[t]he enemy is crushed and in complete retreat from here, and the time which favored their operation passes without their doing anything." These are definitely not the words of a Commander-in-Chief whose army is on the verge of collapse. In fact, by 1898 it was Spain, not the Cuban revolutionaries, who was on the ropes. While the Spanish generally controlled the populated areas of the island, their armies could not defeat the Cuban rebels in battle. [\(12\)](#)

Not only did the Cubans think they were winning the revolution, so did the American government. Also on March 1, 1898, the U.S. State Department described the status of the military situation on the island for the American Minister to Spain. The State Department noted that "the Spanish armies have not achieved any success over the Cubans in more than two months." The note also pointed out that General Blanco had "failed absolutely" in his attack on Gómez. Furthermore, it stated that "the Cubans continue to dominate the Eastern half of the island, and its columns are operating in the Western provinces without the Spaniards being able to stop them." Finally, it expressed the Department's view of Spain's desperate attempt to pacify the Cubans by offering them autonomy. This it called "an utter and complete failure." The report summed up the status of Cuba by commenting that "the social and economic situation of the country is worse than ever, and the national rehabilitation work appears more than the forces of the autonomous regime can cope with." If the United States government really thought the

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revolution was in danger of failure, they hid it well.

The revolution's military leaders did not feel that their armies needed direct assistance from the United States either. Martí may have been dead, but his policy was continued by Generals Maceo and Gómez. Maceo wanted the United States to recognize the belligerency of the Cuban Republic in a Congressional declaration. By doing this, the U.S. could then provide military equipment to the poorly supplied Cuban rebels. Maceo also knew the declaration would give the revolution a greater sense of moral legitimacy. His opinion on direct military intervention was clear, however. The *New York World* quoted Maceo saying "I should not want our neighbors to have to shed their blood for our cause. We can do that for ourselves." In a letter to the New York *junta's* leader, Maceo left no doubt what he wanted, as well as what he did not want, from the United States: "Do you really want to cut the war down? Bring Cuba 25,000 to 35,000 rifles and a million bullets.... We Cubans do not need any other help."⁽¹⁴⁾

Further, in yet another letter, Maceo proudly announced, "Cuba is winning its independence by the arms and hearts of its sons. She will be free in a short time without needing any other help." He also feared the end result of U.S. assistance. "Neither do I expect anything from the Americans. We must all depend on our own efforts. It is better to rise or fall without help than to contract debts of gratitude to a neighbor so powerful." In his final note on the topic, Maceo held his ground while acknowledging that many Cubans did not share his opinion: "Nor is American intervention so advantageous to the future of Cuba as most of our compatriots think."⁽¹⁵⁾

General Gómez was even harsher in his critique of those Cubans who wanted the United States to step in militarily. Those Cubans who disregarded "the North American Republic's absorbing aspirations," in Gómez's opinion, were "morally" on the side of the Spanish. In his mind, to be for U.S. intervention meant to be against the success of the revolution. According to Gómez, "Cuba must not be beholden for its independence in any way, to foreign good graces."⁽¹⁶⁾ American newspaper writer Ambrose Bierce summarised Gómez's opinion in an apocryphal conversation he published on October 3, 1898. Responding to an American general, Bierce imagines Gómez saying, "[i]n other words, Cuba is to have no army of her own, but is to rely altogether upon you. You offer us the independence of a dependency."⁽¹⁷⁾

The question of whether or not American intervention was necessary for Cuban independence has been debated, even within Cuba, since the Spanish-American War. Initially, most Cuban historians agreed with the consensus of American historians in the belief that American military intervention was indeed critical to the defeat of Spain and the success of the revolution. Gradually, however, Cuban historians began to change their views. By the time the Ninth Historical Congress of Cuba met in 1950, they could unequivocally declare that "Cuba does not owe its independence to the United States of North America, but to the efforts of its own people." The statement proceeds to say that Cuba "brought about even before the intervention of the United States in the Cuban-Spanish conflict the complete exhaustion of Spain's 'last man and last peseta'." Although individual historians retained the traditional view, most determined that American assistance had been unnecessary and unwarranted.⁽¹⁸⁾

In 1966, several Cuban historians expressed their opinions on the Cuban revolution and American intervention. They admitted their findings were only preliminary and more research needed to be done in Spanish and Cuban archives, but they generally agreed that while the U.S. invasion of Cuba caused the war to end more quickly than it would have otherwise, the end result was not really in doubt by early in 1898. The Spanish were going to be defeated; only the length of the war remained to be determined. As

historian Sergio Aguirre of the University of Havana wrote, "[t]here is no doubt that the United States hastened the final decision, introducing into the struggle the 'knockout' punch. But victory for the Cubans would have come in the end." Aguirre based his opinions on the fact that the Spanish had no comparable response to the invasion of Western Cuba by the revolutionary armies. As he said, "[w]hy presume that this counter-strike would have been able to appear in 1898 or after?"⁽¹⁹⁾

A more recent historian of Cuban history went one step further. Louis Pérez argued that the United States intervened in Cuba not because they wanted to help the Cubans defeat the Spanish, but because they saw their opportunity to obtain Cuba slipping away in a successful revolution. The U.S. government was well aware that Spain was about to lose Cuba. In 1898 William R. Day, the American Assistant Secretary of State, wrote a confidential memorandum stating that "it is now evident that Spain's struggle in Cuba has become absolutely hopeless." In Pérez's opinion, the U.S. intervened because "[t]he success of Cuban arms ...challenged, too, pretensions of colonial replacement." In other words, the United States could not allow Cuba to become an independent nation, because this would take away the possibility of relatively easy annexation. The United States had tried to annex Hawaii and failed. They wanted a better pretense to annex Cuba. Saving Cubans from the Spanish was an opportunity to assert control in Cuba, but this opportunity was about to disappear in a Spanish defeat.⁽²⁰⁾

The force of this argument is supported by President William McKinley's war message to Congress in April 1898. While McKinley requested the authority to intervene militarily in Cuba, he did not state that the U.S. was acting in defense of Cuban independence. In fact, the concept of independence for Cuba was not mentioned at all. The U.S. was entering Cuba to implement a "forcible intervention ...as a neutral to stop the war." This would entail "hostile constraint upon both the parties to the contest." Far from aiding the Cubans, the Americans were simply going to prevent either side from winning. Furthermore, the United States intended "to secure in the island the establishment of a stable government, capable of maintaining order and observing its international obligations." The President's message, however, made no mention of whether this government would be an independent Cuban government, or whether it would be under U.S. control. Congress would eventually force McKinley to accept the Teller Amendment, renouncing permanent control of the island, but Cuban independence was still not recognized as part of the compromise.⁽²¹⁾

While the typical American historian interprets the sinking of the U.S. battleship Maine as an accidental factor which caused a great public outcry in the U.S., and ultimately the war with Spain, Pérez has a different interpretation. He believes that the United States government seized on the opportunity which the sinking of the Maine provided them. The Maine accident was used "as a contrived pretext for war rather than a chance precipitant." The public outcry "was not so much a spontaneous response to the destruction of the Maine as it was the result of deliberate and cynical manipulation by pro-war elements, principally the yellow press and expansionist politicians, who seized the occasion to advance larger policy goals." Rather than being swept along against their will with the rising tide of public opinion in favor of war, the President and Congress are seen as taking advantage of the accident to obtain what they already desired: war with Spain for control of Cuba.⁽²²⁾

There are Cuban historians who believe the American intervention was both necessary and beneficial for Cuba. In 1972, Guillermo de Zéndegui wrote an article in which he praised the United States for entering the Spanish-American War. He admitted that the Cuban patriots and the United States politicians occasionally did not see eye-to-eye on various matters, but he stated that "[t]he foreseeable risks in help from a nascent expansionist power, which at times appeared as serious as they were certain, were worth

facing." This was because the U.S. was "the only nation in the Hemisphere at that time capable of standing up to Spain with force and, if it came to it, imposing a solution satisfactory to the Cuban cause." He was also quite supportive of the Congressional Joint Resolution of April 13, 1898, which amounted to a declaration of war against Spain. He referred to it as "without doubt one of the grandest, most noble, and spontaneous acts in the history of inter-American relations." Similarly, he calls this entire period of American intervention in Cuba "an exemplary chapter" in U.S. history.⁽²³⁾

He argued that Cuban patriots responded enthusiastically to the announcement that the U.S. was going to intervene in Cuba. As an example, he provided the story of the Spanish General Blanco's attempt to convince General Gómez to enter negotiations before the Americans actually entered Cuba. Blanco warned Gómez that the Yankees were ambitious foreigners anxious to annex the Cuban island. Gómez turned down the offer, informing the Spanish general that, "until now I have had only feelings of admiration for the United States. I have written to President McKinley and to General Miles thanking them for the American intervention in Cuba. I do not see the danger of our being exterminated by the United States, to which you refer in your letter. If that should happen, history will judge them." De Zéndegui considered this to be "irrefutable proof of the true feelings of the patriots at that time." Whether Gómez was speaking honestly, or just diplomatically, is difficult to judge. Based on Gómez's previous statements, it appears that he was simply unwilling to admit his true feelings about U.S. intervention in a diplomatic note to his bitter enemy. Nonetheless, De Zéndegui is an example of a Cuban historian who favored U.S. intervention.⁽²⁴⁾

The debate over the purposes and goals of U.S. intervention in Cuba provides an interesting example of the way in which different perspectives can lead to completely different interpretations of the same event. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle. By learning the Cuban viewpoint of the Spanish-American War, however, I believe the overall picture of what really happened is made clearer. Cubans and Americans should both benefit from the continuing exchange of ideas and dialogue between historians from these two viewpoints.

1. Guillermo de Zéndegui, "The Welcome Intervention," *Americas* 24 (June-July 1972): 3.
2. David F. Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (Lincoln, 1996), 2.
3. Philip S. Foner, *The Spanish-Cuban-American War: the Birth of American Imperialism, 1895-1902* (New York, 1972), xxviii-xxix.
4. *Ibid.*, xxix-xxx.
5. *Ibid.*, xxx.
6. Trask, *War with Spain*, 1.
7. Foner, *Spanish-Cuban-American War*, xxx.
8. *Ibid.*, xxxiv.
9. John Tebbel, *America's Great Patriotic War with Spain: Mixed Motives, Lies and Racism in Cuba and the Philippines, 1898-1915* (Manchester Center, VT, 1996), 7.
10. *Ibid.*, 6-7.
11. Foner, *Spanish-Cuban-American War*, 13.
12. *Ibid.*, 136-7.
13. *Ibid.*, 136.

14. Ibid., 144-5.
15. Ibid., 145-6.
16. Ibid., 147.
17. Ambrose Bierce, *Skepticism and Dissent: Selected Journalism, 1898-1901*, ed. Lawrence I. Berkove (Ann Arbor, 1986), 113.
18. Foner, *Spanish-Cuban-American War*, 140-1.
19. Ibid., 141-2.
20. Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1995), 176-7.
21. Ibid., 177-8.
22. Louis A. Pérez, Jr., "The Meaning of the Maine: Causation and the Historiography of the Spanish-American War," *Pacific Historical Review* 58 (1989): 311.
23. De Zéndegui, "Welcome Intervention," 5-10.
24. Ibid., 8.